Lateral

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Editors' Introduction: The View from US Cultural Studies Today

by SAJ, Robert F. Carley, Eero Laine, Yumi Pak, Alyson K. Spurgas and Chris Alen Sula | Issue 14.1 (Spring 2025)

ABSTRACT Reflecting on this moment of "crisis"—an inadequate word to capture the scope, the cost, and the history of the present violences—we consider what "building something small" might look like, thinking complexly about the immediacy of people and our needs.

KEYWORDS United States, capitalism, cultural studies, neoliberalism

Many of us in different ways are feeling isolated, afraid, crushed, exhausted, uncertain, and destroyed. Not about the faltering of the US liberal horizon of possibility, but about the really-existing violences of this moment. Such violences are simultaneously threatened and forthcoming, obviously and urgently underway, and devastatingly past—beyond our reach to affect or change. They loom over us yet are already here, the ongoing, incessant, normalized operations of racial capitalism, of ableism and imperialism, and of cis-heteropatriarchy. To say that nothing, somehow, has changed, is not to hold today's lives and deaths less closely to our hearts, but to hold past lives and past deaths just as dearly.

Felt differences from the past and from potential futures reverberate through this moment, even if they are uniquely now and here for us. What are some of those feelings from our position in US cultural studies? We fear, yes, that the US's violences will be turned even more against us and against more of us, in the US

and beyond. Survival feels less certain. Escape feels more seductive. There is an uncanniness in watching those around us shift and adapt, swallow, bow, brace, flee, acquiesce, and try, in ways large and small, to find and imagine a life into the future. There is a new loneliness about particular, unexpected fallings-in-line, the loss of those we thought were comrade, family, ride-or-die. There is the way the mind and heart and body and hope breaks, again and again, while continuing to go about our days investing time, money, and energy into infrastructures that no longer feel sturdy: the university, the internet search engine, the supply chain, the rule of law, the behavior of corporate and state bureaucracies, the dollar. There is the new heart-crush that comes with every emergency that is made mundane. These experiences are amplified by the desperation of news media, where ideology is pushed to a representational crisis: how to sell the myth of the liberal horizon when the liberal horizon is crumbling?

There is, too, a pleasure in the dissolution of this, perhaps the most powerful myth of neoliberalism: that racial capitalism has a future in which we can make it better. But this is not an easy humor, and we know all too clearly that it is always able bodies and cis-male bodies and white resourced bodies who win in the fight to be the "last man standing." We want and need and *demand* a future that is trans and queer people's and women's and crips' and Black people's and Indigenous people's and working people's, the world over. So even as we see the potential for change in this period, we are eager, desperate for a fundamentally intersectional understanding to be the shared thread held by most of the one million different ways of building differently that will make up anything after: hope-full.

To be clear, hope is not a prominent feeling of the moment. We're talking hope as a discipline, a practice. We're talking the quote much attributed to Angela Davis: "You have to act as though it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time." Mariame Kaba draws attention to the everyday practice of hope as a way to "live in the world and be of the world,"[1] and we are indeed striving to live in and be of and be with *this* world. An essential factor for

Kaba is an understanding of the smallness of ourselves, our lives as "a fraction of the living that's going to be done by the universe and that has already been done by the universe."[2] This kind of practice of hope is built on a radically capacious imaginary for resisting alienation by understanding the power and significance of others. This capaciousness lies underneath small interventions, where our power still lies, even in moments like this when everything is so urgent that it is hard to feel like anything is enough.

And it's *not* enough. How could anything that is not food in the bellies of the starving be enough? It's not enough, but also we can't do without it. Attention to the present feels crisis-shaped, but "crisis" is also an inadequate word to capture the scope, the cost, and the history. The experience of this crisis as new, partial, or temporary is not universally shared. The ground is beyond uneven—stable ground for building on, of course, is a myth of US racial capitalism and settler colonialism—which makes it feel difficult to grasp action, power, and change. When it feels that there is *nothing* to hold on to, what might be left to grasp *is* the small and the unsteady and the in-process. After all, what are we to each other?

For the many of us who have not yet begun, what does this intimacy, this "building something small," actually look like? It may feel acutely absurd and disconnecting to, for example, organize for our retirement funds to disinvest from Israeli militarization when we are witnessing the state- and economy-sanctioned violence of genocide and war. To make sandwiches for our unhoused neighbors while their former homes sit empty, awaiting a higher bidder. Yet organizing in such concerted, small ways keeps our minds, bodies, and hearts limber so that we do not sink into the momentum of blinking acceptance that is so amenable to racial capitalism's status quo.

Further, writing a letter with your colleagues—say, demanding that your workplace resist fascism's spread in key, specific ways[3]—builds connections, even with just one or two people in your community, laying foundations of Real Human Sociality

should all other or more preferred means of communication and connection collapse. Building small can look so many different ways, thinking complexly about the immediacy of people and our needs. In the face of the power outages and movement blockades after Hurricane Sandy, neighbors shared batteries and clock radios, and able-bodied people from around the neighborhood formed an informal collective to carry drinking water up the dozens of flights of stairs to elders in Chinatown highrises. For many, the only existing connection they had previously was knowing or *hearing* that their neighbors existed, were there, were human, were alive. It's very likely that you will not love these neighbors in the same way as your trusted friends, but this is how sociality still works, even outside of the frame of the media we have designed for it. Growing small connections anyway. Being present with others. Playing by the light of the streetlamp in the public space between your dwellings, one of you bringing a folding table, and another the deck of cards.

This is the milieu: the vital need to hold capacious, enormous, revolutionary hope, so that we can work hard to build on volatile ground something microscopic and demanding and impossible and ephemeral. What more can cultural studies offer? We are holding out the bare threads of what we know, an offering to all the building and the seed-planting of this moment.

A thread: Racism, ableism, and cis-heterosexism *constitute* capitalism and imperialism, and are pieces and sometimes the whole of what makes labor and economic relations, and vice-versa. They are not interchangeable, but structures of power exist via humans and our interactions. When we look at a bomb and what it does, we can say that it is ableism, and many of the same things about it that are ableism are things about it that are capitalism: what it does as an object but also who makes it, where it exists and when and in whose hands or bodies, who has the power to use it compared to who is subjected to it, how the bomb's authority has effects in the world, what could have been done instead with the materials and time that made it, and so forth. And in the same way, the bomb is

racism and the same thing about it that is racism is sexism, is ableism, is imperialism, is capitalism. These are base, not superstructure, issues.

Another: Representation, in itself, is not matter. Its capacity to matter, to make material, mostly happens in the sphere of representation industries themselves. It is not only money that is material but bodies (and their lives) themselves. That disabled people matter, that colonized people matter, that people of color matter, that women matter and trans people matter. That you, reader, whatever your position or identity, matter, that your body and life is material in the world, and that what you do with it matters. And that matter amplifies in your relations with others, in the way that you constellate a group, not an abstract "identity" group, but a specific group of specific people in relation to one another, making and doing and changing together, for however long it may be.

And finally: Despite the lies and myths of capitalism, building at the scale of the interpersonal may also be the only possible way of building social change.

We have no answers, but these are some offerings from the intellectual predecessors of *Lateral*'s kind of cultural studies—the Combahee River Collective and INCITE! as much as Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall. Movements do not happen just because everyone seems to find the exact right single thing to do so that we only have to spend our time and energy *once*. Living in any future that is different is more than one march, one vigil, or one policy change. The social and symbolic significance of an "action" becoming "a movement" might come when the energies and people from one small activity meet up with the energies and people working on another issue, and are joined by the energies and people holding a protest march, and though they mix and change and shift and flow they decide to meet more regularly and do something else, and some of them splinter off but they're all in the streets together facing down the next ICE raid, singing and advancing and holding each other to safeguard what we had, until that moment, collectively built.

Inside This Issue

Lorise Diamond's "Baldwin's Balls: Sensuality, Profanity, and the Testicular Fortitude to Reckon with Race," < https://csalateral.org/issue/14-1/baldwins-balls-sensuality-profanity-testicular-fortitude-race-diamond/> explores racialized disgust and erotic resistance in James Baldwin's essays, novels, and short stories. The erotic functions as "a site of both exposure and dependency," a place where the body—the sensuality defined by and exceeding its biological manifestation, its balls—and its wanting cannot be silenced. Diamond reads Baldwin as utilizing profanity to illuminate these risks of intimacy, while simultaneously offering a politics of sensuality as "critique and corrective to racial alienation."

In "Futurist Forensics: Indigenous Evidence, Cosmo-Epistemologies, and the New Red Order," < https://csalateral.org/issue/14-1/futurist-forensics-indigenous-evidence-cosmo-epistemologies-new-red-order-smith/> Patrick Brian Smith subverts contemporary practices of "media forensics," grounded in state-sanctioned forms of power, surveillance, and control, by drawing on Indigenous epistemologies and decolonial thought. Through an analysis of the Indigenous media collective the New Red Order, which center Indigenous epistemological agency and challenge Western hegemonic practices. Smith advocates for a media forensics that includes diverse publics, communities, and aesthetic-political practices, grounded in subversive, decolonial forms of evidentiary practice.

In "Practical Strategies of Disruption for Dismantling White Supremacy in Ontario's Education System," < https://csalateral.org/issue/14-1/practical-strategies-disruption-dismantling-white-supremacy-ontario-education-system-al-thayabeh/> Aida Al-Thayabeh thinks through stories from students and their communities as well as a critical history of the Canadian education system to suggest practicable alternatives to the colonial education. Taking up how educators think about students of color across multiple facets of schooling, Al-Thayabeh explains and counters problematic aspects ranging from curriculum to

classroom management, assessment, and the definition of “success” itself. At the core of this piece is a methodology shaped by a commitment to solidarity: Al-Thayabeh offers a generous challenge to white and settler educators to get uncomfortable.

In “Surviving in Eugenic Times: Disabled Artists’ Feelings about Their ‘Under-the-Table’ Livelihoods,” < https://csalateral.org/issue/14-1/surviving-in-eugenic-times-disabled-artists-feelings-about-their-under-the-table-livelihoods-collins-jones-rice/> Kimberlee Collins, Chelsea Temple Jones and Carla Rice argue that “in Canada, the lived experiences of disabled people are also death experiences.” Their research project, entitled “Artistry Under the Table: D/deaf and Disabled Artists’ Livelihoods,” brings together disability studies and a sustainable livelihoods framework as they conduct interviews with cultural producers in the Deaf, crip and mad arts movement in Canada. Rather than turning to the less nuanced argument that art is resistance, Collins, Jones and Rice examine how studies of the development of the Global South may be applicable around neoliberal capitalism in the Global North, not to promote a false one-on-one equivalency, but to ask us to consider how ableism is predicated upon measures that are linked to the entwined trajectories of the Global North and South: “eugenics, anti-Black racism, misogyny, settler colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism.” This is particularly critical when thinking of the necropolitical economy in Canada, and how it promotes newgenics: rather than eugenics being a discourse of the past, the authors contend, we see it emerge continuously in the propelling of Deaf, crip and mad artists toward Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD). Focusing on interview participants’ comments on disposability, dignity and art as resistance, Collins, Jones and Rice challenge this forward momentum toward MAiD that is couched in the liberal discourse of rights and accommodation.

In “Subjunctive Grief: Affective Methodologies for Articulating Futures,” < https://csalateral.org/issue/14-1/subjunctive-grief-affective-methodologies-

articulating-futures-wolf-meyer/> Matthew Wolf-Meyer offers a liberatory vision for mourning, considering how not just thinking about but *feeling* future loss might give us more space for and access to change in the present. Wolf-Meyer focuses on two cases: medical aid in dying and parenting children with childhood psychosis in order to imagine how *subjunctive grief* allows for a kind of staying present with loss (and what that loss may bring) that pushes against normative or stage-based models of grieving—linear models wherein "getting better" is expected and the onus of "moving on" is wholly placed on the individual. Bringing future loss into the present and engaging it affectively allows for a radical and revolutionary speculation about what life might be like in spite of and because of its pain, disruption, and messiness, including for people with terminal illnesses or those who are debilitated—by capitalism, by the state, by white supremacy, and also by cancer and psychosis—and for those who love and are in community with them. Grief in the subjunctive (the "if only things were or could be") affords a new realm of possibility for illness, death, and loss, and Wolf-Meyer's analyses and reflections thus add to theorizations of ways of being currently imagined within critical disability studies and Mad studies, in addition to anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and anti-eugenicist frameworks for biopolitics and affect theory: "subjunctive grief allows for the possibility of working through affective attachments to a changing world, making way for a new collective reality that, if it is not just, inclusive, and equitable, is at least more just, more inclusive, and more equitable."

This issue also features a robust number of contributions to the Aporias section. Edited by Joshua Falek, the section examines key ideas in cultural studies from the vantage of emerging activists and scholars, who are entering into long standing conversations and redefining our work into the future. In this issue, Renata Prati asks, "What Should We Do with Our Depressions? Feelings, Biology, Politics." < https://csalateral.org/section/aporias/what-should-we-do-with-our-depressions-feelings-biology-politics-prati/> Prati turns to the Prozac wars—back towards the 1990s, then forward to today—to understand the elisions shaping

present theoretical conversations about feelings, responsibility, and mental health. Any binarization of biology and politics is made patently false when considering agency and mental health, and Prati both critiques the limits shaping this polarization and urges towards a new understanding in the gap. Emma Kaufman engages discourses of antisemitism < https://csalateral.org/section/aporias/the-spectre-of-antisemitism/> through "a tension that lies at the core of anti-Zionist Jewish discourse." The article takes up recent developments and established lines of thought across various sites from history as well as courts of justice and the university. Her work thus offers a meditation and mediation of the ways that antisemitism haunts contemporary discourse. Alejandro Beas Murillo examines marronage < https://csalateral.org/section/aporias/marronage-and-its-aporias-beas-murillo/> and the discursive implications of the figure of the maroon on Caribbean thought. The work intertwines historical readings and contemporary thought on masculinity and Blackness, mothers and heteropatriarchy. It offers readers both a clear approach to the history of marronage and encourages deeper thought on what complicated and troubled figures might do in the present, how they might inform and question our own academic and political investments.

Finally, this issue includes two new episodes from the *Positions* podcast, produced by Mark Nunes and Elaine Venter. The first episode of Season 2, co-hosted by Delores Phillips and Cultural Studies Association's Globalization and Culture Working Group Co-Host Kathalene Razzano, discusses *Disorienting Politics: Chimerican Media and Transpacific Entanglements* < https://csalateral.org/podcasts/positions/chimerica-disorienting-politics/> (University of Michigan Press, 2024) with author Fan Yang, along with writer and historian Mark Tseng-Putterman; a scholarly commentary by Marcus Breen follows. The second episode, co-hosted by Delores Phillips and Cultural Studies Association's New Media and Digital Cultures Working Group Co-Host Reed Van Schenck, discusses AI literacy < https://csalateral.org/podcasts/positions/ai-literacy-and-the-changing-digital-political-landscape-losh-raley-phillips-van-

schenck-milan/> , digital politics, and the 2024 US presidential election with authors Elizabeth Losh (William and Mary) and Rita Raley (UC Santa Barbara) and is accompanied by a scholarly commentary by Stefania Milan.

Notes

1. Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, ed. Tamara K. Nopper (Haymarket, 2021), 27. ↩
2. Ibid. ↩
3. The Professors of Stockton University, "Silence is Collaboration: Academics Must Speak Out Against Fascism An Open Letter From South Jersey," *Literary Hub* (April 2, 2025), https://lithub.com/silence-is-collaboration-academics-must-speak-out-against-fascism < https://lithub.com/silence-is-collaboration-academics-must-speak-out-against-fascism> . ↩

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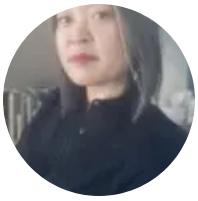

Yumi Pak

Yumi Pak is a student, scholar, and instructor of Black literary and cultural studies, particularly within the overlaps and interstices between the United States, Scotland, and Jamaica. She is currently associate professor of Black Studies and affiliated faculty in English at

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